

THE LIMITED CONSCRIPTION BILL.

How to avoid impending trouble and disaster.

The House of Commons on the 6th January, 1916, by a majority of about four to one, passed the first reading.

The Trade Union Congress sitting in the Central Hall, Westminster, on the same day, by a majority of nearly three to one, decided to oppose the Bill in every possible manner.

It is evident to every moderately well-informed person of average intelligence that if the Conscription Bill is passed in its present form, and put into operation, Great Britain will be divided from North to South into two fiercely contending camps.

This division of opinion cannot be stopped by any General Election or any other means for giving voice to the wishes of the majority of men on the present Election Register. The vote of a majority will not diminish, but will consolidate, the opposition of the minority on whichever side it is.

In the Debates in Parliament on the 5th and 6th January, the case for Compulsion was not supported by anything in the nature of argument.

The Conscriptionists simply said :—"We want some unmarried men who have not yet volunteered, therefore, we must have Compulsion."

So far, no attempt has been made, either in or out of Parliament, to ascertain the conditions on which these young men might be willing to enlist.

The English Soldier is offered on enlistment a sum of 1/2 a day. From this about 2d. is deducted on various accounts. If he wishes to make any provision for dependents, about another 6d. is deducted, leaving 6d. a day for the man himself.

If a civilian employer were to offer young men of twenty 1/- a day with food, clothing, and lodging, he would not get any man to come, however nice the work they had to do, but that is the figure which is now offered to men to do the most horrible work that can be imagined, with a strong probability that he will be killed or crippled within six months of getting to the Front, **and he has to expect that his parents in their old age will be left without support by him.**

In the British Colonies much higher wages are offered, and the Australians get 6/- a day clear of all deductions, in addition to food, clothing, and lodging.

If anybody says that Conscription is necessary simply because all the unmarried men in England have not volunteered on the terms offered, **he merely means that Conscription is necessary to save him from having to offer higher wages to the men that are wanted,** and to leave out this qualification is to make a statement which is in the highest degree misleading.

It will probably be replied that four million men have already joined the Army on the low wages offered, and that the wages cannot be raised for the sake of another 300,000 or 400,000 bachelors, and will also be said that we cannot afford the expense of higher wages. The answer is as follows:—

Married men get a definite allowance for wife and child which, in the case of a great majority, is sufficient, and again that there is no absolute need to raise the wages of those who have already joined on the present wage, although it would probably be a very good thing to do so, holding a considerable part of the money in reserve till the end of the War.

Secondly, the Nation can well afford to pay those who fight a fair wage.

There are millions working on munitions, coal mining, transport, &c., who are getting very high wages, and on what ground can it be argued that those who are doing the hardest work of all are to be paid a miserable pittance? If the wages

of 4,000,000 men were to be raised on the average 5s. a week, that would be equal to £1,000,000 a week added to the present cost of £35,000,000 a week.

If 200,000 tradesmen and professional men cannot join under present arrangements because it involves financial ruin, and if, on the average, their difficulties could be met by an expenditure of £500 each, that represents a cost of £100,000,000. Will such an addition to the National Debt, which will soon be £2,000,000,000, be in any way ruinous, especially as that expenditure is not going out of the country, but is to save British citizens from ruin?

It seems to be forgotten that **this expenditure on the wages of British Soldiers and on the relief of their financial difficulties is no real cost to the Nation at all, it is merely a transference of money from the rich old men and women who stop at home in ease, comfort and luxury, to the poor men who bravely fight their battles in the midst of indescribable hardships and horrors.**

When the arguments for Conscription are reduced to their simplest meaning, they amount to this, that the men and women who are exempt from Military Service by reason of their age do not wish to pay the young men who fight for them a sufficient wage, or to make adequate provision for the parents and other dependents, or to save them from financial ruin.

I suggest the following amendments to the Bill :—

Clause 1 enacts that with certain exceptions, every unmarried man between the age of 18 and 41 shall be deemed to have been enlisted. I propose to strike out from line 13 the six words “deemed as from the appointed date” and to insert “be asked to enlist and to join the Forces if and when he is called upon by 21 days’ notice, and shall be deemed from the date of consent given in writing” (the clause continues) “to have been duly enlisted.”

I also propose that the Government should add another sub-section to Clause 1 as follows :—

“A Compensation Committee shall be established in each recruiting area to consider and settle reasonable financial compensation to be offered to recruits and to parents or other dependents whilst the recruit is serving in the Army or in case he shall be killed or maimed by wounds or sickness, having regard to their future needs in old age or ill-health. And such compensation shall become due if the recruit is called up.”

"The wages offered to both privates and non-commissioned officers shall be increased by 10/- a week over and above the rates hitherto paid."

I also propose to omit from the first Schedule "Ministers of Religion." I see no reason why the shepherd should not die with his flock.

I would propose to add a new Clause to the following effect:—

"In case sufficient recruits do not volunteer after the offer of Compensation and Wages referred to in Clause 1, then those refusing to enlist, and not exempt, shall be starred on all Election Registers as ineligible to vote for a period of ten years from this date."

I should also propose that Clause 3, Sub-section 4, be modified by giving the option of a fine not exceeding £10, and reducing the term of imprisonment to three months.

If the Bill is altered as above suggested, it will remove the element of Compulsion upon which the Nation is now divided.

At the same time, **it will amply carry out the Prime Minister's Pledge to use other means to bring into the Army those who have not yet responded to the appeal**, and there is no doubt that the Bill so amended would be carried with the full approbation of all sections of the Trade Unionists and other Labour men, as well as being a great relief to many middle-class men who would otherwise be faced with ruin if they enlisted.

Here is an easy, simple and popular solution of the difficulty.

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